IMPROVING PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION VIA SOFT MANAGEMENT CHANGES

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SUMMARY

Recent increased delegations of authority to field missions combined with streamlining the program planning and project approval system are directed in part toward resolving recurrent problems with project implementation. However, "hard" management changes concerning organization, the locus of authority, the division of labor and responsibility between AID/Washington and the field, etc., need to be complemented by "soft" management changes focusing on people and the organizational culture of the Agency. This paper presents the findings of an exploratory study to identify some of the "soft" management changes required to support "hard" management changes and to improve project implementation.

Intermediary, supportive functions constitute the core of AID's project management role. To understand better what the Agency regards as superior management, the job performance of twenty-five foreign service officers who were identified as superior AID managers was examined to determine common characteristics of their work and factors which contributed to their effectiveness. The following attributes are frequently cited in Employee Evaluation Reports (EERs) as characterizing their performance: 1) quantity and quality of work, 2) versatility, 3) consistency, 4) adaptability, 5) attitude toward work, 6) operational orientation, 7) technical skills, 8) analytic skills, 9) procedural knowledge, 10) organizational skills, 11) interpersonal skills, 12) leadership, 13) ability to reverse a bad situation, and 14) ability to combine skills and talents to produce sound judgment. Such skills are highly relevant to improving Agency problems with project implementation. More important, these skills are not unique to superior managers; they are also possessed by many AID officers.

The review of superior management performance suggests that the Agency should place greater emphasis on excellence in project management. It is argued that there is an implicit bias in AID's current reward system which appears to emphasize success at project design, program planning and general administrative activities. Second, career success in the Agency results in promoting individuals who have good implementation skills away from direct involvement with project management.

It is recommended that serious consideration be given to determining what additional changes are needed in AID's management system to improve project performance. Though difficult to do, assessment of design work should include criteria concerning the manageability of the plan and whether planning decisions impeded or contributed to implementation. To further reinforce

the importance of designing manageable projects premised on realistic assumptions about implementation, AID designers should be required to participate in evaluations of projects similar to those which they plan, to see where design decisions affected project performance. It would be even more effective if designers were required to implement a project they helped plan.

Second, the Agency should place greater emphasis on project management as a discrete professional category comparable to other technical and administrative positions. Specifically, management rather than substantive skills should be the principal expertise required for this position. It should also be possible to have a long-term, successful career in the Agency while maintaining direct involvement with project management.

This will require adjusting the career advancement system so that those who excell at project management are not promoted away from such assignments. Similarly, financial and non-financial rewards should reinforce the increased value the Agency attributes to successful project performance. To give greater visibility to the accomplishments of project managers, indicators tors or benchmarks of successful job performance which contributed to project implementation should be developed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To support recent organizational changes (e.g., increased delegations of authority to field missions), Agency management should consider what improvements should be made in AID personnel and reward systems to place greater emphasis on project performance.

2. Project management should be more clearly defined and recognized as a professional category with a career path comparable to any other in AID. Management skills, rather than technical skills, should be the principal type of expertise required for project management positions.

3. Project management assignments need to be given greater visibility and recognition in EERs. Performance criteria based on the responsibilities and tasks entailed with AID project management should be developed for annual staff evaluations.

4. The Agency should encourage individuals who have contributed consistently to sound project implementation to develop their careers as project managers. This will require developing a system of financial and non-financial rewards for those who excel at project management comparable to those for other positions within the Agency. In short, career advancement should not necessarily lead the individual away from project implementation.{1}

5. Evaluation of project design work should include an assessment of the manageability of the project plan in addition to how well the individual handled the design process.

6. All AID staff involved with project design should be required, at some point in their careers, to implement a project they helped design.

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1 Note: AID has recently established an award for excellence in implementation performance.

1. INTRODUCTION: IMPROVING PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH INTERNAL AID MANAGEMENT CHANGES

Recurrent problems with project implementation have attracted increased attention within the Agency. The Agency has responded by making major changes in its internal management systems, particularly in the relationship between AID/Washington and field missions. Work in this area has been underway for some time (e.g., the Yeager Task Force, the Asia Bureau's experiment with simplified programming procedures). As outlined in a memorandum from the Administrator's Office (Morris, 10/29/84), the management systems of other regional bureaus will also be streamlined. Delegation of authority to field missions will be increased where appropriate. The program planning and budgeting process will be simplified through a reduction of reporting requirements from USAID missions to the central bureaus. The missions will also have greater authority for project approval at the PID level, combined with greater accountability for program performance. In short, an important objective of the management strategy driving these changes is to increase authority for project implementation where it is needed -- in the missions -- to deal expeditiously with project implementation problems.

Adjusting formal management systems (i.e., organization, structure, linkages -- the "hard" side of management) to be more responsive to implementation problems and making these systems correspond more closely to future staffing patterns are certainly ly important. However, if these changes are to contribute to improving project implementation, they must be accompanied by "soft" management changes. These changes focus on people and include factors such as organizational culture, the explicit and implicit values of the institution, staff skills, leadership, and motivation in the design and operation of management systems.Both "hard" and "soft" management improvements are necessary because they are mutually reinforcing. For example, increased delegation of authority to the field will have a more significant cant effect on project implementation if the Agency also adjusts its reward system to encourage better project management. These two complementary changes would communicate the same message: improving project implementation is of high priority to the Agency, here are the tools to do it, and here are the rewards for concentrating on project performance.

If AID is genuinely committed to improving the implementation of its projects, then the Agency should examine its "soft" management systems just as it has done with internal organization and the relationship between field missions and AID/Washington. Specifically, AID should determine the extent to which its existing system contributes to improving project implementation and what changes are needed to place greater emphasis on project performance.

An important part of this assessment would concern the management skills AID rewards. What constitutes superior management varies considerably even among very similar organizations. Moreover, each organization maintains its own definition of superior management, though not necessarily in a coherent or consistent fashion. How superior management is defined through rewards, such as career advancement, directly reflects what the organization values. This gives an organization an important tool for pursuing objectives by explicitly rewarding certain types of management performance while discouraging others. The question for AID is whether the Agency defines and rewards superior management in ways which contribute to the objective of improving project implementation and performance.

A systematic study of the performance characteristics and career development of AID managers would be needed to answer this question conclusively. One starting point for such a study is to focus on a representative sample of the Agency's superior managers. The career histories of these people should reflect what the Agency acknowledges as outstanding performance and what types of work it rewards and encourages. Clearly, if improvements in project implementation are to occur, the value placed on such work by AID's personnel system must be at least equivalent lent to that of other duties.

To gain some insight into this one aspect of AID's management system, a pilot study was conducted which examined the performance characteristics of foreign service officers who have demonstrated superior management skills. Based on the accounts provided by the EERs of a set of superior AID managers, and a limited number of interviews with some of these people currently stationed in Washington, the performance characteristics most emphasized in EERs were identified. (The procedure for selecting these individuals is described in the Appendix -- Study Approach.) These characteristics include technical competency, managerial skills, and personal attributes. Obviously, EER instructions for evaluating job performance determine the specific categories cited. Many of the findings and conclusions of the paper, therefore, might be dismissed as the obvious "motherhoods" of AID management. But as a set, they suggest that "soft" management changes are needed to give additional, necessary emphasis to improving project implementation.

2. THE INTERMEDIARY FUNCTION OF AID PROJECT MANAGERS

Defining precisely what AID's project management role is and who in the mission does it is more complicated than it initially appears. First, AID's project management role has changed over time. The career histories of the individuals selected for this study cover a fifteen to twenty year period. During this period, the staffing level of the Agency has been reduced substantially. When the Agency had some 18,000 direct hires, it was possible for AID staff to work as technical advisors in host country ministries, or to be responsible for the actual implementation of projects. Current staffing levels obviously preclude such direct involvement.

A second major source of change has been the transfer of increased responsibility to host countries for project implementation. Developing countries have become more sophisticated in their dealings with donors and far more sensitive to what they perceive as excessive interference in their internal affairs.

As a result of these and other contributing factors, AID has begun to relinquish its former role in the actual implementation of projects to host country counterparts and contractors. Hence, the types of activities constituting project management for AID staff today are considerably different from what they were ten or more years ago.

The problem of defining AID's project management role is further complicated by the fact that many individuals who are not project officers -- e.g., mission directors, program officers and contract officers, controllers, executive officers and various AID/Washington support staff -- play a part in or influence project management activities. Therefore, even though the field project officer has primary responsibility for monitoring and facilitating project implementation, a broader range of actors and management skills contributes to the mission's total involvement in project management. This means that a study of what AID considers superior project management cannot be restricted solely to the performance of USAID mission project officers.

Despite the difficulties inherent in defining AID's project management role over the past two decades, the "intermediary function" AID project staff play throughout the project cycle, from design through project completion, has remained constant. Even when AID staff participated directly in project implementation, they played a pivotal role in administering and coordinating the human and financial resources provided by the U.S. Government to the host country via the project. If anything, that role is now even more central to AID's project management responsibilities.

The intermediary function of field project managers takes various forms. At a macro-level, mission management has to mediate between U.S. Government and AID/Washington interests being advanced through the mission's program and comparable interests of the host country. These concerns must be taken into account in reconciling the mission's objectives and those

of host country ministries with which the mission must work. Striking an acceptable balance between these legitimate, but sometimes conflicting interests is essential for the satisfactory implementation of projects.

An administrative intermediary role is also part of AID project management. On the one hand, project management involves compliance with U.S. Government legislation and AID regulations concerning host country expenditures of project funds, contractor performance, commodity procurement, selection of trainees, etc. On the other hand, to expedite implementation,project management requires sensitivity to host country capabilities and management systems, the special circumstances of the project environment, and other factors determining what constitutes practical yet sufficient administrative or operation procedures.

A third intermediary function is balancing long-term development objectives of the project, as well as the larger program of which the project is part, against short-term objectives of accomplishing project outputs. In most cases, there will be definite trade-offs between short- and long-term objectives. The problem is one of facilitating implementation yet accomplishing larger development objectives; in other words, sustainability of benefits. Determining what compromises must be made during implementation is a key function of project management.

A fourth intermediary role for project management is internal to the project. This involves the coordination of the various functions that each office within the mission contributes to the project. This includes both process/procedural expertise (e.g., contract management, financial accounting, commodity procurement) as well as substantive expertise (e.g., agriculture, health, capital development). Similarly, the involvement of host country agencies and staff responsible for implementation must be coordinated with the actions of the mission. Technical advisors, non-governmental organizations, local institutions, community groups, and other actors involved with implementation must be incorporated into the process. In short, AID project management contributes to the overall choreography of the various participants in the project, each with his or her particular set of responsibilities and functions.

The simplest summary of what constitutes good project management would be the performance of these various intermediary functions. If that view is accepted, then AID's role in project management is largely a supportive, low visibility (and sometimes behind-the scenes) activity -- e.g., negotiation with the host country, contracting for services, supervision of the use of funds, monitoring the work of contractors and the delivery of commodities, etc. At the same time, good good project management does not lose sight of the larger development objectives of the activity. Clearly, AID staff who have primary responsibility for project management must have both the technical and personal skills to perform these

tasks to facilitate implementation and to achieve project objectives.

3. PERFORMANCE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUPERIOR AID MANAGERS

The composite picture of superior job performance based on the EERs of the people selected for this study is quite predictable: as a group, they excel in all of the various categories AID uses to evaluate its staff. But it is misleading to suggest that one particular set of activities performed with nearly identical proficiency constitutes superior performance, or that each person possesses equally the same skills which account for outstanding work. As one would expect, each person demonstrates individual strengths and weaknesses which distinguishes his or her performance. Furthermore, the particular activities cited as exemplifying superior performance change with assignments (either different jobs in the same mission or postings to other missions) and with advancement in the Agency.

Though the specific accomplishments of these people vary, their job performance reflects a number of underlying similarities. For the purposes of this section, what characterizes their work and the factors which contribute to their performance (e.g., skills, talents, motivation) are of greater importance than the specific work assignment involved. In other words, the question is not so much what they do, but rather how they perform. The following section, therefore, addresses only what appeared to be the principal characteristics which typify their management performance as a group.

3.1 Work Characteristics

3.1.1 Quantity and Quality of Work

One of the most frequently cited aspects of the job performance of these people is the amount of work they do. Many have been described as producing as much work as two people. In most cases, the large volume of work produced reflects the number of different activities the individual has been involved with during the rating period. For example, the assignments of one individual included the following: ("There are few AID loan officers that have responsibility for managing as complex a loan portfolio as he has here for this Mission. Not only does he supervise the implementation of all Mission loan programs, but he is Project Manager for four of the most difficult.... He also has a number of grant project management responsibilities and acts as my Deputy.") The workload of these people often extends into areas not normally associated with their official job descriptions; for example, ("A consequence of the size and complexity of the USAID program...and the staffing constraints which apply at this post is that Program Office professional

staff, to the extent they are able, bear both 'traditional' staff program responsibilities and line technical project management responsibilities. Incumbent's demonstrated performance in both areas over the rating period has been exceptional.") Even while carrying a heavy workload, the quality of what they produce matches their prodigious output. For example, the performance of the above loan officer was assessed as follows: ("He demonstrated the highest standards of loan compliance, implementation and review and has remained creative and responsive to the unique circumstances of each loan. Above all, he has expertly protected U.S. loan resources and, at the same time, the objectives for which these loans were authorized.")

3.1.2 Versatility

The ability to produce a number of high quality work products as noted above reflects the versatility of these people. For example, one EER comments that: ("He is remarkable for his versatility and the ease and competence with which he moves from one field of responsibility to another.")

Similarly, ("He has undertaken and been assigned both capital and technical assistance projects, projects in health, agriculture and new technology projects.... He has been able to at least keep abreast of the basic technical knowledge one must understand in order to understand intelligently the basic issues and concepts, and to be in a position to develop, design and define a project for Bureau/Agency approval.") A number of these people also demonstrate an ability to take on assignments for which they have little, if any, previous experience, yet they accomplish these tasks with the same high quality that characterizes their other work. This suggests that they quickly master the fundamentals of AID work.

3.1.3 Consistency

The quantity and quality of their work is often cited in initial EERs and this becomes a recurrent theme throughout their careers. This indicates consistency in job performance despite the variety of tasks they might perform during any one rating period and, more importantly, despite the different types of assignments and responsibilities they have during the course of their careers with the Agency. They do not, for example, let the organizational or administrative problems of the mission or AID/Washington office to which they have been assigned seriously interfere with their job performance. Rather, they tend to find the ways and means to solve or circumvent such constraints.

3.1.4 Adaptability

The ability to remain consistent producers of high quality work throughout their careers reflects their ability to adapt to

new assignments, either in the field or in AID/Washington. EERs will note how the person adapted to a new setting and quickly mastered the fundamentals of the task at hand. This requires, among other things, rapidly acquiring an understanding of the mission's program and its current and future projects, as well as assessing host country ministries and counterparts. Consequently, they mesh into ongoing operations with a minimum of difficulty and friction, and soon begin to make a significant contribution. For example, the performance of one individual rated shortly after being assigned to the mission was described as follows: ("He arrived mid-stream in an analytical planning process and was called upon to make substantive judgments even as he was learning the characteristics and peculiarities of the county's agriculture. The choices made strike me as eminently suitable at this time.")

3.1.5 Attitude Toward Work

In every case, the EERs of the people selected for this study at some point comment on the dedication, motivation, and general enthusiasm these people exhibit toward their work with the Agency. They are variously described as "...having enough initiative for two people" or as "a real self-starter". Consistent with other aspects of their job performance, EERs frequently note that the individuals requires minimal supervision and is eager to accept additional responsibility. To illustrate the clam, EERs often report that the individuals took on work responsibilities ordinarily performed by staff two or more grade steps above their present ranking. As a result of their willingness and ability to assume additional responsibilities, in some instances the contributed to improving the performance of their supervisors. Similarly, EERs frequently observe that when the individual filled in during the absence of the Division or Office Chief, work did not back up, sound decisions were made as needed, and operations continued on as normal. (Ironically, these accounts seem to question whether the absent boss was really needed at all.)

These people demonstrate a high level of commitment to their jobs and the objectives of the Agency. A typical observation made in EERs reads as follows: ("He is dynamic, conscientious, dedicated to his job and will work unlimited hours to insure accuracy and completeness of assigned jobs.") This type of person obviously attributes considerable importance to his or her work and, in return, derives genuine satisfaction from it. Moreover, they seem able to maintain this positive outlook despite the numerous setbacks and failures development work entails. A corollary to their dedication to the job is adherence to a high public moral code. In other words, they seem to live by the same principles they work by.

3.1.6 Operational Orientation

The EERs indicate that many of these people had a strong field orientation when they began their careers with AID. The majority of those selected for this study were former Peace Corps Volunteers, while others began working for AID in Viet Nam. This suggests that intense operational field experience (e.g., getting things done despite adverse conditions, finding workable solutions to accomplish objectives, or taking on tasks despite a lack of experience) contributed to the subsequent performance of these people in other assignments with AID. Apparently, this type of initial experience which leads to a bias for action in AID assignments still occurs. One individual interviewed for this study remarked that his "Viet Nam" was El Salvador. Largely by circumstance, he was placed in a position for which he was not thoroughly prepared and given the responsibility to rebuild a major portion of the program. From this "sink or swim" situation, he gained valuable experience.

3.1.7 Technical Skills

Most of those selected for this study had basic technical skills pertinent to Agency operations (e.g., training/experience in agriculture, business, law). During the course of their employment with AID, many receive additional training in their original and related fields of expertise. Perhaps even more important is the practical experience they gain in applying those skills to actual problems. Their effective use of technical skills to administer AID resources is frequently cited in the EERs; for example, ("The depth and breadth of his knowledge has been manifested in reviewing the eligibility of commodities varying from tractors, combines, harrows and food processing plants through the entire spectrum of agro-industry equipment to such large volume items as insecticides, fertilizer and woodpulp.") In short, technical skills constitute an important part of their job knowledge, especially in the early stages of their careers.

3.1.8 Analytic Skills

Two types of analytic skills are demonstrated by these people. As described above, many come to the Agency with a very strong operational or field orientation. These people tend to be adept at practical problem-solving; for example, ("He has an acute mind for analyzing an existing problem, assessing the resources that can be brought to bear on it, and solving it in light of every possible ramification.") As several interviewed for the study pointed out, the ability to anticipate what will happen if certain actions are taken (or not taken), or what is required to achieve specific objectives is essential for managing the situation.

In contrast to such ground-gripping types of analysis, less common (at least at the outset of their careers) is an analytic capability focusing on the more abstract or conceptual aspects

of AID operations and the development process. For example, ("His familiarity with host country culture, language, and understanding of development objectives and methods enabled him to make useful and significant analysis of various program issues. He was able to separate the significant from the insignificant, focusing his time and attention on the problems that made important differences.... In both U.S. and host country circles, he was recognized for his soundly conceived negotiating positions and his persistent perusal of them. He did not retreat from complex or emotional issues, but instead considered them challenges that deserved new and constructive planning approaches.") Typically, this skill is acquired later by a number of these people as they gain experience with the Agency.

3.1.9 Procedural Knowledge

An important factor which contributes to the superior management performance of these people is their thorough mastery of AID regulations and procedures (or at least as thoroughly as such things can be mastered by mere mortals). EERs frequently note that the individual was able to accomplish a large or complex task in less time than others would require because of a better knowledge of Agency requirements. Clearly, this understanding contributes significantly to the ability to carry a heavy workload. An interesting observation made about a number of these people is that they, like others, show annoyance or frustration with the ponderous bureaucratic aspects of AID. However, they seem to be able to find ways to work around or manipulate AID procedures to accomplish their objectives without grossly or blatantly violating official regulations.

3.1.10 Organizational Skills

A persistent theme throughout the EERs is how the organizational skills of these individuals contributed to job performance. Early in their careers, these skills are frequently referred to in connection with project design activities. These people played a key role in coordinating the various participants in the design process and pulled together each person's contributions into a coherent document. Later in their careers, organizational skills are apparent in their ability to assess office operations, to identify more efficient work assignments, or to lead multi-bureau/multi-agency committees (e.g., task forces).

3.1.11 Interpersonal Skills: Managing Staff and Working With Counterparts

Managerial skills involving the organization and direction of staff become increasingly important as these people advance in the Agency. Many apparently lacked these skills when they began working for AID, but few fail to acquire them during the

course of their careers. The most common pattern followed is first managing resources and later learning how to manage people. Apparently, much of this learning occurs on the job and requires no small amount of innate common sense. Regardless of how they learn to manage people, the skill is often central to their job performance; for example, ("He has been a superb supervisor/ executive, delegating imaginatively and challenging the potential of his staff. He permits each staff member to carry his own load and, in doing so, has developed a first-rate team. His ability to work productively and creatively with people is evidenced also in his relationships with host country counterparts. He has been an enormously effective negotiator, handling all loan negotiations by himself with absolutely no intervention on my part.") A key point illustrated here is the managerial ability to develop staff essentially by treating them as competent professionals while remaining cognizant of their limitations. The leadership this requires also has a direct effect on other aspects of job performance. For example, the leadership ability of another individual enabled this person to: ("...develop and encourage a more positive attitude within the Contract Team and re-orient the Contract Team Chief of Party toward more substantive work and away from administrative details, and sensitizing the Government to organizational and staffing problems limiting the effectiveness of the project.") As these accounts suggest, a number (not all) of these people have the interpersonal skills which enable them to work effectively with others. Though these skills are important for their work in either the missions or AID/Washington, their ability to interact smoothly with host country counterparts is especially useful. This contributes to their effectiveness as negotiators, while others are commended for the rapport they establish with their counterparts. As several interviewed for this study reported, cultural sensitivity is essential for gaining such acceptance.

3.1.12 Leadership

Leadership is ordinarily interpreted as a managerial skill, but it is worth special attention because it is often either explicitly or implicitly cited as a factor contributing to superior management performance. Examples of leadership vary widely, from overcoming a particular problem affecting a project, to directing either offices in AID/Washington or USAID missions. The leadership displayed by these individuals is quite consistent with other aspects of their performance and personal style cited above. Their enthusiasm and commitment often carry over to other mission staff and host country counterparts with beneficial effects. For example, ("With common sense, hard work, initiative and persuasion, he has created a new mentality in his counterparts and a truly host country program responsive to the needs of the country.") The dedication and a strong sense of responsibility exhibited by another individual were reported to have produced the following: ("The host country service chiefs constantly sought him out, and at all hours, for advice and assistance. His tactful encouragement induced several to be more productive than would otherwise have been the case.") The

"contagious" effect of one person's motivation stimulating others to do likewise suggests that the person's leadership abilities, at least in part, stem from the professional respect gained from AID colleagues and host country counterparts. But leadership often means getting people to do things which they ordinarily would not, and requires strong interpersonal skills.

3.1.13 Ability To Reverse a Bad Situation

An important characteristic of the job performance of AID's superior managers is their ability to reverse a bad situation. For example, several EERs describe how individuals contributed to improving the program of a mission which prior to their arrival was performing poorly or had encountered major obstacles. These people apparently were able to get slow moving projects operating at a more acceptable level and to quickly identify those projects which must be shut down. In some instances, the host country had lost confidence in USAID's ability to assist them. The EERs indicate that some of these people were also able to build or restore that lost confidence.

3.1.14 Combining Various Skills and Talents: Sound Judgment

None of the preceding characteristics or contributing factors solely accounts for the superior job performance of these people. Rather, it is their ability to bring their various skills, personal talents, and past experiences with development work to bear on a given task. Examples of this cited in EERs include the following: ("...leadership in development of primary education and rural enterprises loans and his contribution to the CDSS clearly demonstrated an outstanding knowledge of the development process, AID programming requirements and the dynamics of project development, as well as his ability to express himself in clear and effective written communication.") And ("He is a gifted performer in all aspects of program work -- analysis of host country development problems and needs, program formulation and justification, orchestrating budget preparation, conducting project evaluations. He is also especially able in the design and negotiation of new projects. However, what makes his contribution unique is a capacity to focus an impressive array of talents on the performance of specific, complex tasks. It is unusual to find an officer so able to take the barest outlines of a program concept, give it operational content, and bring it to fruition as a practical development activity.") The combination of capabilities underlies reports that the individual exhibits exceptionally sound judgment. In large part, sound judgment accounts for several of the preceding factors -- the ability to anticipate what will happen or what is needed to achieve objectives, the ability to reverse a bad situation, and the ability to contribute to the overall improvement of mission operations. In short, the feature which best characterizes the management performance of these people is the combining of learned skills, personal qualities, and development experience to work effectively.

3.2 Shortcomings: Are They Really As Exceptional As They Seem?

The descriptions of performance and abilities provided by the EERs of these people create the impression that a race of Development Ubermenschen is in our midst -- dedication and commitment to work which approach zealotry, prodigious work output of only the highest quality, decision-making guided by a prescient knowledge of the development process, etc. Though it might be somewhat tangential to this study, a more balanced picture can be at least inferred from what the EERs do not say or only imply. Rarely are references made to a sense of humor which might cast a useful and healthy perspective on the nature of working for AID. Several are reported as genuinely amiable folk who are a delight to work with, but this is counterbalanced by others who might not be so pleasant in their dealings with their colleagues. Reports that a person is "a perfectionist who works long hard hours to achieve program goals" or "details are a fetish with him and timeliness is a rule of life" suggest someone whose commitment can become abnormal compulsiveness, whose initiative can become aggressiveness, and whose own personal standards can become sanctimonious abrasiveness. Indications that some cross these lines are reflected in observations that the person tends to be impatient with others less highly motivated or capable. Similarly, statements such as "He is more comfortable in management situations where he is the only motivator" suggest a personal style which must dominate the situation and course of events. Being a jovial companion is of course not a requisite for working for AID, and to a certain extent, personal shortcomings (such as a short temper, shouting at staff, or a tendency to cry in public) can be excused by colleagues. But as the EERs suggest, interpersonal skills go a long way toward making an effective AID manager.

Repeated references to routinely working long hours also carry some negative connotations. As one of the individuals interviewed for this study pointed out about himself, the fact that he worked twelve or more hours six and sometimes seven days a week reflected his own inability to delegate tasks to his staff and trust that their performance would be equivalent to his own. He also pointed out that in retrospect, the diminishing returns from working additional hours seriously call into question its usefulness or desirability. The EERs further suggest that the drive these people have at times needs to be tempered or curbed by admonishments not to go beyond their technical and personal capacities. Similarly, their self-confidence and desire to complete a task lead some not to seek advice or assistance when it is needed. In short, without denigrating the exceptional work of these people, normal human frailties can at least be inferred where they are not specifically cited.

4. DISCUSSION

Technical and analytic skills, a "can-do" approach to the

job, resourcefulness in pragmatic problem-solving, an ability to work with and motivate host country counterparts -- these as well as the other various skills cited above clearly have high utility for project implementation. Moreover, many of these skills are germane to satisfactory performance of AID's intermediary project management functions.

What cannot be answered by this study is the degree to which these skills are also possessed and used by other AID staff. But anyone knowledgeable about the Agency and the type of people it attracts should be able to accept the generalization that many AID officers have comparable capabilities. Perhaps they do not have as broad a range of skills or experience, or perhaps they do not consistently combine and concentrate their skills as the more successful AID managers appear to do. Nonetheless, skills directly relevant to sound project management are available to the Agency. The question, then, is whether AID is making maximum use of these skills to improve project implementation.

To begin to answer that question, it is important to recognize that the preceding examples of superior performance were selected primarily to illustrate skills useful for project management, or to describe skills which facilitated implementation. However, these examples are not representative of the overall content of EERs.

When the specific accomplishments cited in EERs are examined, achievements pertaining to design and planning figure prominently as indicators of superior performance. The following description of one person's role in planning a regional development project exemplifies this: ("With a minimum of supervision, he assumed leadership and organized time and people resourcefully. He played a key decision-making role in such issues as the role of the Housing Investment Guaranty component, target group participation and the institutional relationship of the various host country ministries. He supervised the assembly of social soundness and environmental analyses and reviewed all the work of the seven member USAID project team, directing them, as necessary, to gather additional data or edit or rework draft materials. He established a review committee to review preliminary and final drafts of the PP and he drafted several main sections of the paper.... The project, with nine major activities, ten implementing institutions and two sources of U.S. funds (development and HIG) is extremely complex and is considered by USAID, the host country and AID/ Washington to be an important innovation in the effort to narrow the rural/urban gap in incomes and living standards. It took job knowledge, organizational teamwork and productivity....") The ability to orchestrate various resources and participants in the project design process is unquestionably important to Agency operations and deserves adequate recognition. It is important to note, however, that no mention was made in subsequent EERs about the utility of the design in respect to the implementation of those plans or project performance. In this particular case, the project referred to above proved to be extremely difficult

to implement and has been one of the less successful projects for the USAID mission involved. According to mission staff, the initial design was fundamentally flawed. Designers lost sight of the implementation requirements for carrying out the project. As the above passage indicates, the project was extremely complex, involving a number of interrelated components and a variety of host country ministries. This complexity accounts for much of the project's difficulties -- even under the best of circumstances, the design was overly optimistic about host country capabilities. Furthermore, the ministry chosen for operational control of the project lacked the staff, resources and general orientation or commitment to make the project work. Similarly, the mission itself failed to recognize what would be required to implement the project as designed.

It is unlikely that this example is typical of the consequences of emphasizing the process of design over the product of design. From one perspective, the product was a good one -- it received AID/Washington approval for authorization. But as a practical plan for implementing a development project, the design was lacking. Any tendency within the Agency to emphasize process over product, unfortunately, lends support to the criticism that simply moving money on time too often takes precedence over concern for project effectiveness and development impact.

This has potentially deleterious effects on project implementation. Other than AID/Washington Project Design Office staff, few in field missions work solely on project planning. Rather, they have a mix of duties including the management of on-going projects and the design of new projects. But if design work attracts greater attention in the Agency, then those with the ability to excell in this area will tend to concentrate on such work (something akin to moths attracted to a flame). Given normal expectations for career advancement, one is less likely to devote a great deal of time to something which receives less attention than other duties which are more highly recognized and rewarded. Regardless of the individual's motivation and commitment to development goals, if the system emphasizes meeting obligation schedules, for example, more than improving project performance, then the former will tend to drive Agency operations more than the latter. In short, at the heart of the matter are the values contained in the Agency's organizational culture.

Another factor also works against recognition for management activities contributing to project implementation. Design work is generally more visible -- i.e., there is a distinct start and finish which results in specific products (e.g., PIDs and PPs). Hence, it is easier to recognize and reward successful execution of the process by an individual. Project management, on the other hand, is a long-term, cumulative process which is largely a supportive, facilitating activity. In comparison to design work, it is also more difficult to attribute the result of project implementation to any one person.

The suggestion that design work is the "fast track" within the Agency is hardly a new or radical claim. For example, in the Project Implementation Course, AID staff identify problems which impede their work on project implementation. In the July, 1982 "Summary of Implementation Problems and Recommendations" prepared by Development Associates, one of the most pressing problems cited concerned a perceived imbalance in AID's reward system: ("Several problem areas crossed geographic boundaries. One of the most pervasive of these was the inequality of the reward structure for project design vs. implementation. In spite of recent recognition of this imbalance, Project Officers continue to cite this situation as a cause for problems in implementation. They feel that increased recognition of good project implementation and management in the EER system would signify that AID was truly interested in successful implementation.") Similarly, another group who took the course in 1983 felt that AID's design process was an important source of implementation problems. They recommended that all staff involved with project design be required to take the Project Implementation Course and receive a grade no less than an "A." The implication is obvious -- unrealistic design decisions which contribute to serious implementation problems are due to project designers ignoring or overlooking what will be required to carry out project plans. The findings of GAO reports and internal AID studies lend support to the association between unmanageable designs and poor project performance.

A second pattern suggested by the EERs of these individuals is that career advancement in the Agency moves the successful manager away from direct involvement with project implementation. Achievements directly affecting project implementation tend to receive greater attention in EERs in the initial stage of the individual's career. With each promotion, someone who initially excelled at project management increasingly assumes administrative rather than operational responsibilities. An implication of this pattern of promotion is that project management is relegated to less effective or less experienced staff. In short, long-term, direct involvement with project management is not the typical route defined as a successful AID career.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implications of the design versus implementation problem and the promotion of effective managers away from direct involvement with operational matters are disconcerting. Both run contrary to the Agency's increased concern about recurrent project implementation problems. At the very least, more thought needs to be given to "soft" management changes which might resolve these problems. Though the findings of this study are tentative, they do suggest several possible improvements which deserve consideration.

First, greater emphasis should be placed on the manageability of project design as a criterion for evaluating job performance. Ideally, project design work should be assesed on the basis

not only of how well the person handled the process, but also whether the design facilitated or impeded implementation. This would force designers to be more attentive to implementation issues since they would be held accountable (both in a positive and negative sense) for the manageability of their plans. However, without a major change in the EER system, it would be virtually impossible to assess project design work in this way because of the Foreign Service rotation system (i.e., the designers are long gone by the time the strengths and weaknesses of their work becomes apparent).

One possible alternative would be to require more detailed and realistic implementation planning in project papers. The Agency could also make designers routinely participate in evaluations of projects similar to those they plan. But it would be even more effective if project designers were required to implement at least one project. Administratively, this might be difficult to arrange. If possible, however, this would force design staff to confront directly planning decisions and key assumptions which affect project performance.

Second, the problem of promoting excellent managers away from project implementation will be equally difficult to overcome. To do so runs contrary to the normal course of bureaucratic organizations -- i.e., promotion means assuming greater responsibility over the use of human and financial resources.

However, position and authority within the bureaucracy do not motivate everyone and that is certainly true of many AID staffers. Among the set of superior managers selected for this study, many entered the Agency with a genuine interest in project implementation and participating directly in achieving development objectives. In other words, the problem is not with the people, but rather, with the system. Advancement in the bureaucracy can frequently become contingent on proficiency at processes rather than the production of results. As mentioned earlier, if that is the way success is defined, then highly motivated people will naturally direct their energies toward such objectives.

Obviously, AID will continue to need people who have administrative skills. But the definition of successful job performance and a successful career in the Agency should be broadened to encourage consistent excellence in implementing projects for sustained development impact.

One step the Agency can take is to reexamine how the project management role position has been defined. Handbook 33 (0340.60) states that the project manager is "... a managerial director with overall responsibility for participating in the planning, design, monitoring and evaluation of projects and project progress." The duties of a project manager, therefore, include project development, monitoring contractor performance, coordination with host country counterparts, financial monitoring of project funds, and preparation of necessary AID documentation. The scope of work for a project manager states

that ("If the management aspects of the assignment take precedence over the need for training and experience in a technical discipline or if the position requires surveillance over several projects involving more than one technical discipline where no discipline is grade controlling, the position is titled Project Manager. If the responsibility is limited to one or more projects in a technical discipline and training and experience in that discipline is required for effective performance, then the position is titled Project Manager [Agriculture], Project Manager [Population], etc. Specific technical qualifications should be included on the position description, if these are required for acceptable performance on the job.) The managerial qualifications required for the job in addition to technical qualifications never stipulated. Indeed, the list of representative duties cited in the title description would require both types of skills. It is as though management, per se, is not officially recognized as a professional skill, but rather as ancillary to technical expertise.

This suggests that better definition of the project manager role as it relates to implementation is needed. Specifically, the project manager functions and responsibilities should allow for career advancement without removing the individual from direct involvement with AID's project management. In other words, project management deserves recognition as a professional, long-term category within the AID system. AID needs to better capitalize on the capability and interests of effective project managers by placing value on the successful and continued performance of that job equivalent to the value placed on other types of assignments. A system of financial and non-financial rewards geared to criteria emphasizing project performance would be needed to encourage the Agency's best implementation people to build their careers on success in that area of Agency operations. At the very least, grade limitations on the project manager position should be comparable to other professional categories (it is currently limited to FS-2). In short, the Agency must attach as much significance to project performance as it currently does to project and program design if the much needed improvements in the implementation of AID projects is to be achieved.

This will require giving greater visibility to management performance which facilitates implementation. At present, program and project management tends to be judged by financial, aggregate criteria -- e.g., the size of the pipeline. Though these measures might have utility for tracking certain types of management performance, they have very definite limitations as indicators of individual contributions to implementation. The amount of undisbursed funds says little about what the project manager has actually done. That is, for a project encountering implementation problems reflected by a growing pipeline, the situation could have been much worse had it not been for the project manager's accomplishments. Alternatively, the absence of a serious pipeline problem could have little to do with the actions of a project manager (e.g., external economic conditions

are exceedingly conducive to implementation, the host country is very interested in the project, competent counterparts and contractors are working on the project).

In short, indicators or benchmarks based on the various responsibilities and tasks entailed with project management are needed to recognize or highlight job performance. Incorporating management performance criteria of this sort in the annual evaluations of AID staff would allow assessing an individual's achievements associated with project implementation and rewarding those who have made important contributions to project performance.

APPENDIX

STUDY APPROACH

Information for this paper was obtained from AID's Personnel Management Office. The purpose of the study was explained to five experienced personnel officers. They then identified twenty-five foreign service officers who 1) have been with AID for ten or more years; 2) are currently at the FS-1 level or higher; and 3) on the basis of largely corridor reputations, are perceived as fast-track individuals in the Agency. The criteria assured that those selected for the study had been with the Agency long enough to establish a consistent record of superior performance and that they had been both formally and informally recognized as superior managers/performers (i.e., grade level and reputation). Final selection was based on concurrence among the personnel officers. Someone would suggest a name; if others agreed, that person was chosen for the sample; if someone strongly dissented, they were not included. Five of those selected are presently posted in AID/Washington. Information about their performance as managers was obtained through short informal interviews (thirty to forty minutes in length) concerning their experience and views about AID's management systems. For the remaining twenty individuals, their EERs were reviewed to determine common patterns of performance.

The majority of individuals selected for the study were men; however, several women were also included in the sample. It was not possible to determine whether any of the people chosen belonged to a minority group. However, at least for the twenty-five individuals used for this study, there were no discernible differences between men and women in the language used to describe their performance or assignments.

Ideally for the purposes of this study, the principal assignment of all twenty-five individuals would be project management. However, after ten or more years with the Agency, career advancement leads away from project management to more senior administrative positions. (This problem is discussed more fully in Section 3 in regard to defining the implementation duties of an AID project manager.) Consequently, EERs reviewed for this study cover a range of assignments -- from project

manager to mission director. Technical specialties were equally broad -- agriculture, veterinary science, population, law, business administration, and finance. As a result, the performance characteristics of these people are generally applicable to most job positions in AID rather than exclusively to project management.

An obvious limitation of the selection procedure is that the sample is not random nor sufficiently large to be statistically representative. Second, no formal coding of data obtained from EERs was made, which might have introduced subjective biases into the findings. Third, the reliability of reporting in EERs can be questioned. EERs are biased toward positive reporting; therefore, it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between the superior and the average AID manager in some cases. Fourth, focusing only on individuals representing AID's superior managers does not allow comparing their performance to that of better-than-average managers. As a result of the data source and the study design, it is difficult to specify precisely what the selected individuals do which distinguishes them from the average, competent AID manager.

In light of these limitations, it should be recognized that this is primarily an exploratory exercise -- i.e., with a minimum investment of time and resources, what can be learned about the performance of AID's superior managers pertaining to project implementation? The method followed for selecting a set of superior managers should be sufficient to screen out individuals who should not be included in the sample. It is more likely that the above criteria introduced a conservative bias (i.e., individuals were excluded who might actually be superior managers) which increases the probability that those selected are indeed superior AID managers.

As to the data source, all the EERs for each individual in the sample were reviewed. Any one EER might be a highly unreliable data source subject to the biases of the specific rating officer. But over ten or more years, the individual is evaluated by several different rating officers. The consistency of performance which emerges from these evaluations indicates that EERs were sufficient for the limited objectives of this study.

Though the performance of the selected individuals cannot be carefully compared to other AID staff on the basis of their EERs, the description of their work does offer some insight into which activities are frequently cited as illustrating superior performance. In short, the findings should be viewed as indicative of general performance patterns which more rigorously designed studies could explore with greater precision.